

**The Bill Blackwood
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**Assessment Centers in the Law Enforcement
Promotional Process**

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, police departments have relied on written tests and oral interviews in their promotional processes. While written testing is important, it usually only addresses the managerial side of the equation and misses the importance of measuring leadership within the candidates and their ability to execute tasks frequently performed by supervisory personnel. While oral interviews can sometimes quantify leadership capabilities of the candidates, they can be rife with bias and favoritism and usually do little to measure the ability of the candidates to perform the tasks of a supervisor. This deficiency hinders a department's ability to select the best candidate to fill the role. It is paramount for police departments to select the best candidates for supervisory roles. Supervisors help to build or maintain the culture of the department and police administrators should not only search for good managerial supervisors, but should invest resources in selecting leaders and facilitators in those critical positions as well. A promotional process should include a multifaceted approach that includes a comprehensive assessment center. This process, in conjunction to a written test, will facilitate the department's ability to advance the best possible candidate into the supervisory ranks or to further those supervisors to a higher rank.

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INTRODUCTION

The selection of supervisory personnel within police agencies has always been a critical task facing police administrators as they strive to select the best candidate possible for their leadership role. Traditionally, police departments have employed promotional processes that included written tests alone or tests used in conjunction with a review board, often comprised of supervisory personnel from the testing agency. These practices, while functional in nature, do an inadequate job selecting the best aspirant for their new leadership position. Selection processes involving review boards frequently involve favoritism, both real and perceived, and do little to foster the adequate selection of supervisory personnel as a result of their interview only format. On the other hand, the written test alone also is inadequate to measure the true capabilities of the candidate and only focuses on the ability of the person to memorize study material, not their abilities to “think on their feet” or get a sense of how they would lead officers in their charge.

Fortunately, assessment centers used in conjunction with written testing have become more prevalent over the last few years and have changed the way many police administrators think about the promotional selection process. Joiner (1984) stated “Assessment centers are often defined as a variety of testing techniques designed to allow candidates to demonstrate, under standardized conditions, the skills and abilities that are most essential for success in a given job” (p.437). This demonstration of skills and abilities are paramount to selecting the best possible candidate for promotion to a new supervisor as well as moving upward in the supervisor ranks. Coleman (2002), stated, “Many experts in the field of police testing for hiring and promotions conclude

that it is the ultimate process for measuring performance ability in a realistic setting” (p.

3. It is the contention of this writing to illustrate that to select the most qualified candidates for supervisory positions, police departments should employ assessment centers in their promotional selection process.

POSITION

To select the best possible candidate for advancement, the promotional process should include a multifaceted approach that includes a comprehensive assessment center as a replacement for an oral interview examination. The assessment center should, in itself, test the abilities of the candidates to perform in simulated situations that mimic the occurrences that they will be required to perform once they are promoted. In contrast, oral interview examinations merely provide “face time” with the interviewers and do not objectively measure the skills of the candidate. Hale (2005a) asserted “Since they employ highly structured evaluation techniques and multiple raters, assessment centers can be much more objective than other kinds of evaluation devices, such as oral interview examinations” (p. 22).

Assessment centers are much more complex as opposed to oral interview examinations as they focus on individual tasks that a newly promoted or newly elevated supervisor would be required to perform. An assessment center might include a process that measures a candidate’s ability to handle a citizen complaint or to counsel a subordinate on his or her lackluster performance. These types of exercises within the assessment center can be administered to the candidate through role-play, where each assessor can get a feel of the candidate’s ability to address the problem. In contrast, an

oral examination interview would only provide limited information as they are all too often just informational gathering.

Assessment centers can include other exercises, such as reviewing an offense report for content, clarity, and accuracy or having the candidate perform an “in basket” exercise where he will be required to compose memorandums, make assignments, and contend with other routine matters and their prioritization. These “hands on exercises” display the versatility and capabilities of the candidates on a greater level than the oral interview examination as oral examinations only test the candidate’s ability to interview well and display their communication skills.

The panel of examiners for an assessment center should include supervisors of the level where the candidates aspire to promote. The assessors should be independent of the department holding the promotional process to lessen the appearance of favoritism, both real and perceived. Joiner and Clancy (2000) wrote “A participant’s current supervisor should not be involved in the assessment of a direct subordinate when the resulting data will be used for selection or promotional purposes” (p. 9).

In a typical oral interview examination, the judges are usually supervisory staff from the department holding the promotional process and sometimes know the candidates well. Often, when the interviewers are familiar with the candidates, there are biases as the interviewers are familiar with the candidates past and present performance as well as their personalities, strengths, and faults. These circumstances could be perceived as unfair or rigged depending on the final placement of the officer on the promotional list. These unavoidable biases are eliminated with the anonymity of

using independent assessors making the process fairer and less likely to be challenged at a later time. Hale (2005a) wrote, "Since candidates usually feel that the assessment center is much more fair and job-related than other types of examinations, they are less inclined to challenge the results of an assessment center" (p.22).

When a promotional process involves an assessment center, it has greater focus on leadership aspects by including the examination of the candidate's leadership abilities as well as how he would function in his newly gained position. The right choice for a leadership position is paramount to the effective operation of an entity. Walker & Torres (2007) wrote "There is little doubt that when an organization makes the right promotional choices and promotes the most qualified personnel, there tends to be less overall problems within the organization" (p. 29). Every law enforcement entity should strive to be as efficient as possible and choosing the right leaders is an enormous step in the right direction.

An assessment center also provides greater insight to how a supervisor will progress or lead throughout their career. There is a correlation between elevated assessment center scores in a first line supervisory assessment center and the probability of those supervisors to promote to the position tested as well as higher level ranks in the future (Eisenburg, 2001). Even though a strong performance at an assessment center may not guarantee a promotion during that particular process or promotion to higher levels, it is an excellent indicator that supplemental promotions will follow absent of other extraneous factors such as limited open positions.

Many officers that perform well on assessment centers display above average leadership abilities and have the drive and commitment necessary to excel in the

comprehensive process. The assessment center can be tailored to test a candidate's leadership ability through exercises that the assessors observe and evaluate. While the assessment center may not be perfect, it provides equitable, well-established means to identify future leaders (Hilgenfield, 2000).

The most positive aspect of the assessment center is that it frequently selects the best candidate for the position. The candidates selected for promotion are typically better prepared to take on their new responsibilities than those selected without an assessment center. The assessment center significantly challenges their ability to demonstrate their potential to take on the role of a newly appointed or elevated supervisor. Hale (2005b) assessed, "Experience has shown that people who do well in an assessment center generally prove capable of performing the duties of the position for which they are being considered for" (p. 86). If a supervisor is chosen that has limited or poor leadership skills, and performs his new function on a substandard level, it reflects negatively on the department and tarnishes its relationship with the community it serves. Walker et al. (2007) stated, "The wrong promotional choices can affect the organizations working relationship with the community" (p.29).

While the written test is an important part of the promotional process as it eliminates a subpar portion of the applicants, it is limited into only measuring the candidate's ability to memorize study materials and not how to place the information into real life situation. Therefore, it is ineffective as a standalone mode to select the best possible person for promotion, as it is only one dimensional in nature. Unfortunately, some states civil service laws allow it as the only promotional method allowed without approval of the officers involved. Additionally, the written test fails to identify the

leadership potential of the candidate or their ability to handle the day-to-day functions of a supervisor. To the contrary, the assessment center's tasks can be specifically tailored to have the candidate demonstrate specific tasks or leadership abilities required by a supervisor. The International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) continues to express the belief that written tests were a poor evaluation method for entry level officer selection and espoused that the assessment center was the best method for choosing candidates for law enforcement (Tinsley, 2002). Tinsley further explained that the IACP continues to support the use of assessment centers and conducts training and instruction on the method as well as posts articles about the process.

Assessment centers also provide training and evaluation to the candidates and gives them insight on their performance both positive and negative. Hale (2005b) asserted that a valuable advantage of the assessment center is that it allows the assessors to provide feedback of their performance and to help them determine what they did well and what aspects need to be improved in the future. The feedback can come from videotaped assessments or written evaluations and is important to the process as it can help them sharpen their leadership skills for future assessment centers and their leadership abilities in general.

COUNTER POSITION

Promotional processes are complicated endeavors and the assessment center is without exception. The preferred option of using outside agency personnel are expensive to obtain as it is generally the responsibility of the assessing agency to provide housing, per diem and sometimes pay for those participating as assessors. Novac (1999) poised that the greatest negative facing the assessment center's

implementation was cost: "The cost generally related to conducting an assessment center makes the less attractive to police and city administrators who are always concerned with budget constraints" (p. 9).

Despite the costs, police and city administrators must take on the burden of the additional expenses to ensure the process provides the best possible candidate for the position and ensuring that the process is fair and defensible. If decision makers from police and city administration skimp on the process because of the price tag, the likelihood of the results could be less than desirable.

Promotional assessment centers also involve the time required for the promotional process to be extended. Written exams often take up to 90 days to administer if adequate study time is given. If an assessment center is added to the process, this can expand the process by several days or longer. O'Leary & Lewis (2001) contended, "Approximately 15 percent of the large agencies that reported using an assessment center also reported discontinuing its use. The most single cited reason for this decision was 'too much time is required to conduct the process'" (p. 27).

Assessment centers also put additional stress on the candidates. After several months of preparing for a written test, the added burden of the assessment center is levied upon them and often their families and both have to cope with the pressure during the difficult time. While this may be stressful for the candidates, how they deal with the added stress can be important as the position they are attempting to promote to, in most cases, is a stressful one in itself.

Assessment centers require extensive training for the assessors that is often taxing on a police department. Hale (2005a) penned, "Assessors should be thoroughly

familiar with the duties and responsibilities of the position in which the candidates are being evaluated for and must be trained in assessment center methods and techniques” (p. 24). Assessment center assessors require training in the skills needed to evaluate the candidates objectively. Walker (2007) stated, “Assessors must receive instruction and practice in observing behavior, taking notes, and rating performance” (p. 31). This type training is important to the process to ensure that the assessors are able to function in their role as an evaluator of the candidates. If they are not properly trained, their task will be in vain as most likely, the best candidate will not be chosen. Training in this instance might be cumbersome for a police department, but it has the additional benefit to the assessor of honing their evaluation, observation, and note-taking skills. This aspect should help them to maintain the abilities that are often necessary in their own supervisory role.

RECOMMENDATION

In the past, law enforcement agencies have had inadequate promotional systems to select their future supervisors and leaders. Often, the selections were mired in the simple processes that were utilized, which frequently only included a written test or a test and an oral interview. Sometimes, the chief of police merely selected a “good ole boy” or someone who did a great job at the line level. The written and oral examinations, while adequate in requiring the candidates to memorize study material and sharpen their interview skills, were woefully lacking in the ability to select future leaders and supervisors. These traditional tests also failed to measure the candidate’s ability to think and solve problems they would encounter on a daily basis as a newly appointed or elevated supervisor. While there are usually concerns about fairness in

promotional systems, assessment centers take away the majority of the biases that occur in an oral interview and candidates are less likely to challenge the result because of the fairness of the process (Hale, 2005a). The use of outside assessors that are adequately trained in assessing the actual job functions further reduces the possibilities of favoritism and adds to the validity of the selections. Assessment centers can often predict the leadership abilities of the candidates and predict their promotional progression throughout their career with the process tending to pick the best person for the position. The right person for the leadership position is paramount to the effective functioning to the department which benefits the community they serve and helps to foster trust between police and citizens.

While assessment centers are expensive, cumbersome, and require a copious amount of training for the assessors to adequately perform their evaluative function, their benefits far outweigh the negatives of choosing inadequate leaders. Assessment centers place additional time factors on the process and give added stress to the candidates. (O'Leary & Lewis, 2001) These factors, while important to many police and city administrators, should be minor in comparison to the problems that will materialize at a later time due to the selection of an inadequate or ineffective leader.

It is paramount for any police organization to select the best possible candidate for a promotional or leadership position. It has been said that sergeants are the backbone of any department and set the tone for the agency. This makes the selection of the right person to a leadership role critical to every aspect of the agency and the community it serves.

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